

Church leaders prepare to assess Vatican II

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 bishops' conferences for dealing collectively with issues at national and regional levels.

● The church was strongly committed to the search for Christian unity through the ecumenical movement, and a series of official dialogues with other Christian churches was spawned.

● Dialogue was extended to non-Christian religions and non-believers and aimed at greater mutual understanding and cooperation on practical issues.

● The church was strongly recommitted to social progress and world peace and to an active influence in science and culture.

● The apostolate of the laity was defined as including co-responsibility, although to a lesser extent, with ordained ministers regarding church authority and administration.

Reforms in priestly and religious life also were part of the updating process.

For example, because of the shortage of priests, the door was opened to a permanent married diaconate. There are 7,000 permanent deacons in the United States, more than in any other country.

After the council, Church officials began institutionalizing the reforms. The Vatican established a series of permanent agencies to handle the numerous new issues.

Priests' councils and lay parish councils were formed to advise Church officials on pastoral and administrative issues. The world synod of bishops, gathering delegates from national hierarchies, was formed to meet every three years to advise the pope. Education programs were revised to include Vatican II teachings.

In 1983, the new code of canon law took effect, incorporating council reforms into the Church's judicial structure.

The old code did not mention national bishops' conferences. The new one spells out a series of rights, obligations and powers of these conferences.

The number of canons dealing with the laity was increased in the new code.

The changes also launched a trying time for the Church. Some people complained that the reforms went too far, while others were frustrated because they expected much more. Tens of thousands of priests left the active ministry, many to marry, after the council reaffirmed celibacy for Latin-rite priests. The number of Catholics attending weekly Mass dropped in many countries,

especially in Western Europe and the United States.

These trends have leveled off, however, and there has been an upturn in vocations, especially in mission countries.

Many of the applications of the Vatican II reforms have displeased Cardinal Ratzinger, whose doctrinal congregation monitors theological orthodoxy. The cardinal had direct experience with the council when, as a priest, he was a theological adviser to the German bishops attending it.

Since the council, the Church has passed from "self-criticism to self-destruction," and has not achieved the unity expected, he said in a book published this year. Its title in English is "The Ratzinger Report."

"There had been the expectation of a step forward, and instead one found oneself facing a progressive process of decadence that, to a large measure, has been unfolding under the sign of a summons to a presumed 'spirit of the council,'" the cardinal said.

Cardinal Ratzinger defined this "spirit" as the belief that everything which is new or thought to be new "is always and in every case better than what has been or what is." He said this is really a "pernicious anti-spirit" which discredits the council.

He criticized what he sees as an exaggerated openness to a hostile world and the growing role of national bishops' conferences.

The Church must now seek "a new balance after all the exaggerations of an indiscriminate opening to the world, after the overly positive interpretations of an agnostic and atheistic world," the cardinal said.

The aim of Vatican II was to reestablish the balance between the power of the Pope and the bishops, but its post-conciliar applications through bishops' conferences has had a "paradoxical effect," he said, because individual bishops risk becoming anonymous. He said bishops' conferences "have no theological basis."

Pope John Paul has said that the council had a positive influence on the Church and that the cardinal's views are personal opinion.

"He is free to express his opinion," the Pope said in August. "His opinion corresponds to many events, but it cannot not be understood in this (meaning); that the council, Vatican II, was a negative influence, a negative meaning for the Church — no, the contrary."

Cardinal Ratzinger also has said his published views are "completely personal"

and "in no way implicate the institutions of the Holy See."

Several other high-ranking Vatican officials shared Cardinal Ratzinger's concerns, but had more positive views of the council's overall impact.

The Church must continue "to build a bridge to the modern world," said Cardinal Paul Poupard, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Believers.

Because of the dialogues prompted by the council "the image of the Church in the world has improved," he said.

The work of bishops' conferences was defended by Cardinal Bernardin Bantin, head of the Vatican Congregation for Bishops.

"Collegiality — that is, the episcopal conferences that translate collegiality at the national level — is the place where the bishops can reflect, help each other solve problems, agree on policy," he said.

"If a local bishop loses his personality, he isn't a good one," Cardinal Gantlin added.

Another defender of bishops' conferences is Bishop James Malone of Youngstown, Ohio, president of the U.S. Bishops' Conference, who will participate in the extraordinary synod.

In a report on the U.S. Church prepared for the extraordinary synod he said, "There is a need for continued reflection on and clarification of the theological basis of the episcopal conferences."

Among the issues affecting conferences, Bishop Malone said, are: "the character and force" of their statements; their role in

dealing with national problems "such as dissent by some theologians and religious;" and their relationship to "individual bishops, to other episcopal conferences, and to the Holy See."

His report also questioned whether Vatican II or misinterpretations of the council could be blamed for weaknesses in the church.

"Cultural factors originating outside the church and the council account for many recent problems in Catholic life in the United States, as in many other countries," he said.

He cited "exaggerated individualism, the culturally conditioned disinclination of many persons to make permanent commitments, the breakdown of marriage and family life, the sexual revolution and exaggerated secular feminism."

"There are grounds for thinking that such factors would have done more harm to Catholic life than they have, were it not for the council and post-council renewal," said Bishop Malone.

A continuing problem, say church leaders, is educating people, especially those born after the council, about council teachings.

"A new generation has arrived, and they know nothing" of the council, said Cardinal Gantlin.

Bishop Malone said a major catechetical effort is needed. Many people who talk about the council have not deeply studied its teachings, he said. He suggested developing a universal catechism of Vatican II and "authorized summaries of the council documents written in simple language."

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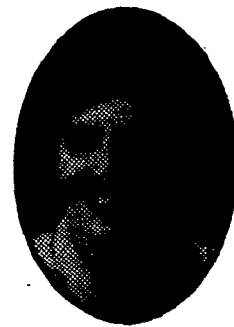
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